The Writer sits at his computer, attempting to channel the Muse onto the depressingly blank page. It’s worked before, but today, everything he writes ends up deleted. It was all so perfect the other day!

A commonly held belief of writing is that it is an unchanging extension of our soul. Either can write or we can’t. Or we’re special because have the ability to channel it from on high. However, there’s another, better method of writing that takes focus away from divinity. I would argue that, in the words of James Clear on systems TKTKTK

In the newsrooms of the Oregonian, Jack Hart discovered that many writers had this pernicious problem, and became one of the forefront of what became known as the Process theory of composition. Championed by a cabal of legendary writers, coaches, and professors, process composition champions the idea that TKTKTK

And important part of the process is reducing tasks to component parts. Author Timothy Ferriss describes this in his book The 4 Hour Chef, detailing a methodology to reverse engineer skills. TKTKKT

When applied to writing, the DiSSSS process uncovers that writing isn’t just one task it’s many small ones. In fact this is where a lot of problems in writing come from, the assumption that it’s done all at once.

The blank page is always the first challenge to any creative, and so necessarily generating ideas is the first step to the process. Perhaps the best methods to do this surprisingly come from the world of advertising. On Madison Avenue, creative were, perhaps for the first time, forced to adhere to corporate deadlines where millions were on the line. Scamping was one, powerful idea generator where creativity was tapped by TKTKTK.

This manner bypassed the muse, or at least summoned her when and where you wanted her. Or at least prevents her from standing you up.

While the idea of the tortured artist desperately searching for ideas seems ubiquitous it wasn’t always so prevelant.

In fact, John McPhee, in an article entitled Blocked writes in the New Yorker that it comes from a certain place and time.

TKTK

If the ideas are the blood and guts of a story, then structure is its bones, the organizational principles that make it stand.

Most of us were taught outlining as children, but I feel a method that interfaces better with scamming comes from a former editor at the Wall Street Journal. In his course TKTKT

The steps are simple

1. Atomoize the ideas and list them out, one per line

2. Tag each one with a general family marker

3. List out all the families

4. Rearrange the families in an order that works best

5. Physically move the points to the families

6. Physically rearrange the points within each family

Fellow process composition writer Jack Hart further talks about it in his excellent book, A Writer’s Coach. TKTK

But another more powerful force is also at work in writing. Legendary BBC documentarian David Attenborough transports winks you from the rainforests of the Amazon to the mountains of the Himalayas. But the way he did it is what you forget. It seems effortless, like a magician whisking you away to another, far distant land. And as a viewer you accept it. The sis the magic of transitions.

Described as an internal secondary narrative by TKTK , it provides movement. But the good thing is that they’re model able. Great writers, documentaries, and stand up comedians use them to elegantly shift from one, seemingly unrelated topic to another. And luckily they’re don’t seem to be many of them - over the years I’ve only been able to find around 10 different types.

Quote by Jack Hart Lexicon of Ledes TKTKT

Beginnings and endings are the other big problems, once even highly advanced journalists have issues with. John McpHee wrote a whole article in the New Yorker about it. But many of the process guys have solved in the same way that I solved transitions. Jack Hart had his lexicon, and Chip Scanln had his Encyclopedia of Endings. TKTKT

In the past, first drafts were the first high wall to hurdle ove3r, and often I just didn’t make it. With the mechanics of the article sorted, the bar to jump is. A lot closer to the ground. All the mechanics are at play, smoothly guiding you from introduction, families of points, transitions all the way to endings.

Research can easily, however, become endless, especially when you’re writing nonfiction. That is why it’s best to do it now. It’s very different from the usual method, which focuses on potentially endless research. While I think research is often necessary if you don’t know what you’re saying or have no knowledge in the first place, the problem is that it can end up being a time drain. Perfectionalism and ccompleteism, too traits common in writers, function to make this a dangerous stage where you can never emerge from.

If you’ve done some initial research you know what you have to say - then get to writing and figuring out the structures and transitions. Holes can be clearly marked with the tag “TKTK” - the traditional journalistic method for indicating something is to come TKTK.

Then fill in the holes - this limits endless deep research because it has now become highly targeted.

While you might have the full article complete, it’s still like a rough hewn statue - still in need detailing and polishing. TKTK Metaphor from Stephen King’s On Writing.

I find polishing to be a matter of repetition. As with scamping, the key is writing and rewriting with minimal in the moment editing. Keeign a synonym finder open, keep changing small elements without really stopping, using intuition and gut reactions to know if a word or fragment is correct.

Done correctly it’s very similar to the adage of the monkey on a typewriter producing Shakespeare TKTKT

The only difference is you’re using discernment to know when you’ve managed to hit on an amazing turn of phrase. Keep the turn of phrase and continue on. Visually this almost takes the form of a miniature bit of evolution, with the constant writing, synonym finder, and repetition acting as a genetic drift across successive generations and your instinct in keeping fragments as selection protocol.

WSJ edit TKTK has another method. For him it’s all about adding another layer, especially with implanting thematic elements. He also goes on a hunt for common mistakes, like redundant phrasing and passive voice. Polish can also mean word choices, and jack hart talks about it with his list of words TKTKTK .I’ve done this difficult and unfamiliar writing to great success.

While the nitty gritty is very important, there are some general tips for the overall process.

Jack Hart TKTKT mentioned that if there’s ever any point in which you are having difficulty writing one of these levels, it probably means that the preceding level was done badly. I have noticed this to be very true. James Patterson says to keep things moving quickly - he metnions quickly moving from one draft to the next TKTK to prevent gunning the system. Don Murray describes this process in a different way when it comes to beginnings. If you’re having problems, write 50 beginnings quickly.

All of these once again focus on the mechanics of the overall process rather than everything resting or failing on individual stages of the writing.

Another useful manner to view the process is by recruiting different personalities.

For scamping, imagine a part of yourself that’s a confident yet whimsical creatives. I know several of these personality types, the ones that are free spirits, who often don’t have a lot of new or unique things to offer, yet boldly proclaim them online as though they’re god’s gift to literature, spelling mistakes and all. Fundamentally, they believe that they are special and should be heard. Or alternatively, it’s the monkey on a typewriter, never stopping, gleefully pounding away to the music of the keyboard. This is perfect for scamping, rough drafts and some level of polishing, where cynicism is definitentely is just not useful.

The Analytic is useful for mechanical aspects of the process. He’s the person who doesn’t like the confusion of soft skills, but loves puzzles, mechanics, and is utterly enthralled with simple tasks with discrete rules. Or, the architect, the person who is enthralled with the big picture, like Tony Stark amiusedly designing the first Iron Man suit, throwing this away, keeping that, changing it up just to see, with none of the urgency for a final product, engrossed in playing with concepts. The entire article is like a jigsaw puzzle, carved so every piece is unique and fits just so. This is perfect for the organizational phase, where word choice is inconsequential.

The Magician is trying to pull a beautiful fast one on the audience. His hand movements may be highly technical, his tricks may involve complicated bits of string and false thumbs and look oh so mundane in the light of day. But to the audience he’s a whisking them from one place to the next, effortlessly. These are transitions - there are only a few, they are very mechanical, but when done write you don’t even know they’re there.

The Archivist loves to dive into facts and figures. She’s also a bloodhound and a detective, sleuthing for details. Bookish, she has to be held on a tight leash, but when reigned in she targets searches, and comes back out again with summaries to be placed neatly into the wholes carved out for her by the Analytic.

And lastly the Queen is the editor, the one who must be appeased above all else. She’s arrogant, anal retentive, demanding, the ultimate fashionista with unquestionable taste, requiring the highest of standards. And if she doesn’t like what she sees, she banishes the piece to another one of her earlier compatriots. She’s the one in charge of the details, formatting.

The other steps are combinations of these personalities. The monkey creative pounds on the keyboard to get through the first draft and for polishing a turn of phrase, though it works with the editor to know what to keep. The Analytic works with the Magician for transitions, because really there are only a few and it’s a mechanical act of matching the two together. The same occurs with beginnings and endings - there are only a few categorically, but the magician makes it hit home with a flash, and the editor presides over it, making sure it all hangs together.

Writing is a dissociative art TKTK Don Murray quote. Luckily we don’t have to just rely on some and mirrors to recruit different skills.

Scamping can be practiced. NaNoWriMo is a program that focuses on word output rather than content, with a supportive community and a gamfiied system in place to fuel mastering the art of pounding on the keyboard. While that was the system that really helped me master it Write or Die is another program for writing online, where TKTK.

Synonym finders are key for word choices. Synonym finders can also offer TKTK.

Brainy Quotes is a great tool for beginnings and endings - while the quote beginning or ending is somewhat pause, it is definitely a great welcome addition, and can spur on thought on other avenues to begin and end pieces.

Having a list of Transitions, Ledes, and Endings on hand is key for those sections.

And scrivener, is a great program for layering drafts, and easily moving back and forth between them. You can view split screens of different drafts, which is handy when, say, writing a first draft while looking at a skeletal outline. It also has a cork board feature where you can move categories around visually.

Personally, the best advice I’ve seen on the overall process comes from Brandon Sanderson. Always be writing on something, he says TKTK - Youtube. In my writing pipeline I have many articles in various stages that I’m writing at once. This not only allows me to take breaks away from getting too close for my editor to discern what is good - Sanderson?? TKTKsays sometimes you have to put it aside for a while and then come back to it, but it also helps with emphasizing the process.

ADDITION OF WSJ Guy’s list of things to do to disassociate

I use Trello to track my writing pipeline. With this program I can enter into any writing stage and now exactly where I am and what I need to do, while still having an eye on the overall writing work I’m doing. If I get tired of one stage of the writing process, I can go and work on another stage. When people ask me what I’m writing about, I often feel like I have memory loss. Before, I was working on a topic and I was incredibly, minutely involved in it. This disjointed method places emphasis on writing techniques rather than living or dying on the topic.

This reliance on external tools underscores how mindless the entirety of the process is. Which makes sense - over thinking is perhaps the leading cause of writer’s block. Taking the editor out on holiday is a big part of what causes forward momentum to continue uninterrupted. Idea generation and tapping into the font of creativity appears to be fueled by NOT being so attentive. Transitions, beginnings, and endings are very rote, as is structure. But as writers we often don’t like to think o fit like that. And that’s problematic because it preserves the idea that this is all magical process not subject to ur control and improvment. Few writers practice the art of beginnings or endings or learn how to scamp.

But on the plus side, the flip between mindless and mindful offers a great diagnostic tool. TKTKKT When discussing form for olympic lifting, physical therapist Kelly Starrett talks about how good form can be diagnosed with stressors. When stress - either time or more weight - is added, it showcases faults in our form. I have found that the same can be said about writing. Write for time, or write when you’re watching tv. If you’re having difficulty in certain steps it might mean you either need more training or you’re process isn’t broken down enough.

Take Brandon Sanderson, a notable fantasy author. Unlike authors like Patrick Rothfuss or George R. R. Martin, who are known for their procrastination - Sanderson never stops writing. At one point, he wrote an entire novella on the way back from Taiwan as a break from his main writing. TKTKT

And that underscores the general benefits to this process. When done correctly there’s no stopping. The process offloads the weight from needing to think really hard about any one things. Which gives you more output, the ability to write virtually anywhere. More output also gives more opportunites to practice, rather than being cramped and stymied by needing a commission. It also prevents the biggest problem in writing - psychology. Writer’s are crazy drug addicts and depressed out he ass - even the successful ones end up committing suicide. There’s a reason for this. There’s no metrics for good writing. Basically any other type of learning has a metric by which we can improve. And if we can’t clearly improve and we assume writing I sa function of who we are, happy writers are the exception.

One of the most instructional experiences on writing I had was from visiting the Picasso Museum in Barcelona. Rather than showcasing just his famous pieces, it was an encyclopedic catalog of an artists life, where e each room was a phase of his life and creative development. I was lucky enough to go with an artist friend, who beckoned to a sketch of a hand. “This,” my friend said, “is where you knew he was going to be great.” Each room was a showcase of him mastering a vocabulary, a specific style, that gave him the solid building blocks to fully express himself later in the unique manner we all know. In writing we all too often minimize the discrete skills and building blocks. And yet, only when process is king and the humble steps mastered can we make the leap to art.